

Lateral

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Review of *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine* by Jennifer Lynn Kelly (Duke University Press)

by Eric W. Ross | Book Reviews, Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025)

ABSTRACT Jennifer Lynn Kelly's *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine* is a timely and informative look at conditions on the ground in occupied Palestine. Kelly's work shows how tourists, in particular Western tourists and tourism can counter the ongoing genocide and displacement of Palestinians. Kelly offers several case studies including tours and workshops across occupied Palestine. Tourism is a performative action whereby tourists travel and eventually return home, changed in some way by the process. For Kelly, this transformative potential is what activists in Palestine are seeking to tap into. Tourists are invited to witness, and empowered to return home and work towards Palestinian liberation elsewhere.

KEYWORDS Palestine, archive, colonialism, history, memory, solidarity, tourism

Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine. By Jennifer Lynn Kelly. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023, pp. 344 (Paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1929-9. US List \$28.95.

Welcome to Palestine, your work is not here. This is the ethos that animates Jennifer Lynn Kelly's *Invited to Witness: Solidarity Tourism Across Occupied Palestine*. For Kelly, solidarity tourism represents a confluence of factors in Palestine that bring together the historical and ongoing colonial logics of Israeli occupation, the political economy of tourism, and an international solidarity

movement that leads activists, scholars, artists, and tourists to visit occupied Palestine. Drawing on an extensive archive of Palestinian activism as well as ethnographic reflections of her own experience as a solidarity tourist, Kelly's intervention makes clear that tourists are invited to Palestine *as tourists*, to bear witness to Israeli settler-colonialism, but she makes it equally clear that these same tourists are invited to return home at the end of their trip. The work of solidarity tourism, for many of Kelly's Palestinian interlocutors, doesn't really begin until the tourist returns home. Along the way, Kelly's tourists encounter multiple temporalities, anguish, joy, and community, revealing a Palestine that is far more human and humane than is often depicted in Western media, especially in the United States.

Kelly argues that the tours themselves are built on colonial logics. The tours seek to expose the work of settler-colonialism in Occupied Palestine, and yet at the same time rely on a colonial logic of witnessing. Many of Kelly's tourists articulate that no amount of research or reading about Palestine could prepare them for seeing the realities of life under occupation. They also note that when they return, the report-back genre of writing produced by foreign visitors to Palestine is often taken more seriously than the myriad written and visual records left by Palestinians themselves to describe occupation. Amidst Israel's current (2023 to present) invasion and devastation of Gaza alongside spikes in violence in Jerusalem and the West Bank, Palestinians have produced even more firsthand evidence of Israel's settler colonial violence. Indeed, the current Gaza invasion is one of the most well-documented human atrocities in history, but aside from empty words and modest aid, little has been done in the United States and Europe to hold Israel accountable. This underscores Kelly's argument, and makes *Invited to Witness* an urgent book for understanding how despite overwhelming material evidence, the Western world has turned a blind eye to Israeli violence.

The first three chapters of the book emphasize the historical significance of tourism for Occupied Palestine and as a cultural battleground between Palestine

and Israel. To emphasize the importance of tourism as a settler colonial strategy for Israeli settler-occupation, Kelly notes that Israel included a professional tour guide as part of their delegation to the first Oslo Accords in 1993. Thus, for Palestinians, solidarity tourism aimed at Western tourists as well as Israelis becomes a moment of rupture by utilizing the familiar genre of the walking tour to tell an unfamiliar story to tourists—a story that is unfamiliar or illegible to many Westerners because of the way Occupied Palestine is understood by Western media.

Chapter one details the emergence of solidarity tourism during the first intifada (1987–1993) when tours were outlawed by Israel, but attracted a small following through international academic and activist circles. These early tours and their subsequent report-backs established the trope of Western tourists needing to see occupation in order to believe it. The purported “necessity” of the report-back reinforces the unwillingness on the part of Western authors to cite Palestinian sources. The report-back was initially established as a rhetorical strategy to help persuade western audiences of conditions in Palestine, but has had the longer-term effect of leading many scholars and activists to ignore Palestinian literature on occupation.

In chapter two, Kelly describes how solidarity tourism was codified and legalized, and how it emerged as a challenge to the Oslo Accords by showing tourists the realities of Palestinian fragmentation while also directly challenging Israel’s control of the narrative. Palestinian tour guides, Kelly notes, went to great lengths to show an alternative version of Palestinian history while also asserting the right to tourism, something most in the West take for granted.

Chapter three explores olive tree planting as solidarity tourism. Kelly shows that part of the triumphal narrative of Israeli history is that the establishment of Israel has allowed for Israelis to care for the land that had been neglected or abandoned rather than taken and dispossessed by force; Israel often points to its

afforestation projects whereby trees have been planted and parks established so that Israelis can conquer the land with their feet. These projects serve two goals, argues Kelly: the first is to establish a claim to the land, the second is to hide evidence of previous occupation. Many Palestinian walking tours include visits to the ruins of former villages, some consumed by newly planted forests (87). However, to counter the claim of abandoning or neglect of the land, Palestinian organizations have invited tourists to come to Palestine and plant olive trees (88). These trees that have been cultivated by Palestinians for centuries are a rebuke of Israeli insistence on the lack of connection between the Palestinian people and the land (92). On many of these tours, however, Kelly notes that tourists witness Israeli bulldozers digging up the newly planted orchards.

The second half of the book explores solidarity tourism in Jerusalem, Gaza, and Greater Occupied Palestine. Chapter four examines the multiplicity of occupations within the city of Jerusalem: how Israelis have come to occupy Palestinian homes, to dig underneath Palestinian land to search for and claim historical artifacts, and to clear away evidence of Palestinian life. Chapter five moves into Palestine's pre-1948 borders to explore the remains of Palestinian life and livelihood in Israeli occupied cities and villages. Here, Kelly asks the question of what return will look like. Her interlocutors, organizations like Zochrot and Badil, know that these are difficult questions, but as Kelly shows, they structure their tours in such a way as to make sure that Israelis and other tourists alike understand that these are nevertheless questions that must be answered. Zochrot and Badil are both organizations built around guided tours. Zochrot offers walking tours of Palestinian villages destroyed during the Nakba, while Badil focuses on contemporary displaced Palestinians, offering a glimpse into the ongoing nature of occupation. Chapter six brings us to Gaza through media such as the "You are Not Here" virtual tour, and Anthony Bourdain's 2013 visit to Gaza, which was broadcast on CNN. These examples serve to challenge the depiction of Gaza as only a place of suffering and attempt to restore humanity and life to Gazans. The final chapter, chapter seven, returns to the tourists themselves, illustrating how

many struggle to make sense of what they've seen, and how they grapple with how best to move forward.

One tourist earlier in the book remarks to Kelly, "If only there was Facebook Live when this shit happened," (145) in reference to seeing the ruins of a house demolished in 1948. As Kelly is quick to point out, however, there are house demolitions in Palestine streamed on Facebook Live every month. *Invited to Witness* suggests that this temporal distance is something that solidarity tourists must grapple with: occupation and settler colonialism are not over; they are ongoing, in Israel and in other settler-colonies like the US, Canada, and Australia. The challenge for these tour guides, according to Kelly, is to get tourists to see that which they have been conditioned not to see—to understand these issues as ongoing and not settled. Kelly's *Invited to Witness* begins to grapple with these questions and opens a conversation across multiple fields, including tourism studies, cultural studies, and social movement studies by showing how activists and organizations are utilizing memory to inform the struggle in the present, a struggle that is even more urgent in light of Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza. There is ample evidence describing the conditions of occupation in Palestine that those of us who are in the West have been invited to witness, and it is more important than ever that Westerners finally heed the call.

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